

CHAPTER ONE

**A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF
THE TRANSMISSION**



I. The Guiding Principle behind the Value of Acupuncture

I.1. Reasons for the Decline of Acupuncture

Acupuncture used to be the primary treatment modality among the many therapies of Chinese medicine. When we look at the entire text of the *Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic*,¹ acupuncture is discussed in far greater detail than anything else with the exception of theory. The logic behind the ability of medicinal substances to promote health and treat disease is quite easy to grasp: Since medicinals differ in their basic nature and flavor as well as in their composition, they are capable of treating different diseases. But what about acupuncture? The needles commonly used today may vary in terms of size, gauge, and length, but their “composition” is always stainless steel. And yet, needles of the same composition do treat hundreds of thousands of different conditions in clinic. How can we explain this conundrum? For people of the modern age, this may be its greatest obstacle and at the same time its greatest attraction.

Just now, we mentioned that based on its share in the content of the entire *Inner Classic*, acupuncture is the most commonly used among the many treatment methods in Chinese medicine. When we reflect on today's Chinese medicine, however, and look at the scale of the departments of acupuncture and moxibustion in Chinese medicine hospitals, it becomes very clear that the contemporary situation is the exact opposite. Why would it be that acupuncture has gone from being the most commonly used treatment method to being the least commonly used one? What is the ultimate cause for this problem?

In the chapter on the “Nine Needles and Twelve Origins” in the *Spiritual Pivot*,² we find a discussion of the two special characteristics of acupuncture: One that it is “easy to use and difficult to forget”; the other that it is “like pulling out thorns, like wiping away filth, like untangling knots, like bursting through blockages.” The first point mentioned here speaks to the easiness of acupuncture, that it must be easy to carry out and easy to grasp,

1 A reference to the *Huangdi Neijing* 黃帝內經 (Yellow Emperor's Inner Classic), often abbreviated below as *Inner Classic*.

2 A reference to the *Jiuzhen shieryuan* 九針十二原 (Nine Needles and Twelve Origins), which is the first chapter in the second part of the *Inner Classic*, the *Lingshu* 靈樞 (Spiritual Pivot).

and moreover that you can perform it as soon as you learn it, which makes it very difficult to forget. If acupuncture, on the other hand, has become complicated and turned into something that is “difficult to use and easy to forget” instead, how could it be a commonly used treatment method! And if it is not commonly used, then of course it is unlikely to be able to endure for a long time without declining. The second point above addresses the efficacy of acupuncture, namely that the treatment of illness with needles is just as swift and as clear-cut and direct as pulling out thorns, wiping away filth, untangling knots, and bursting through blockages, or in modern terms that it is just this straightforward! If acupuncture possessed these two characteristics, who would not want to study it? Who would not want to use it? Of course everybody would, and in this way it would of course be “transmitted to later generations . . . and persist till the end without perishing and endure for a long time without being cut off.” If we now use these two points above for a comparison with the reality today, we see quickly that the reason why acupuncture has declined and has become an uncommon treatment method is ultimately that it has lost these two special characteristics. Acupuncture is no longer a treatment method that is “easy to use and difficult to forget,” and its clinical application to the treatment of diseases also no longer has an effect like pulling thorns, wiping away filth, untangling knots, and bursting through blockages. As a result, people have of course distanced themselves from it. For this reason, we should recall the former glory of the Dao of Acupuncture and set out by retrieving these two defining characteristics as the only possible way forward!

I.2. The History behind the Term *fangzhen*: From “Acupuncture Prescription” to Directive Policy

In contemporary conversations about Chinese medicine, people might be more familiar with Banlangen Chongji 板藍根沖劑 (Isatis Root Instant Tea Granules) and Huoxiang Zhengqi Shui 藿香正氣水 (Patchouli Qi-Rectifying Liquid), but know relatively little about the classical formulas by Zhang Zhongjing from the Han dynasty. In Chinese medicine, these two patent medicines fall within the scope of prescriptions and herbal³ medicines. The

3 In this book the term “herb” is used to refer not only to herbal drugs but also to animal and mineral drugs.

treatment of disease with herbal prescriptions is not arbitrary, and you cannot simply use Banlangen granules or Huoxiang Zhengqi Shui for colds, but must follow specific treatment principles. In fact, to evaluate a physician, all you have to do is look at their grasp of treatment principles. As such, theory, treatment methods, prescriptions, and herbs are the four hallmarks of Chinese medicine, in this specific order and rank. It is only when we have mastered all four of these that we deserve to call ourselves physicians. We often hear doctors of Chinese medicine explain how they write prescriptions to treat illness. Given that these prescriptions are composed of herbs, why is this particular prescription composed of these particular herbs? And why is this particular prescription used to treat this particular condition? The answer to these questions involves the treatment principle. When a treatment principle is present, we call this “treating disease,” but when no treatment principle is present, we call this “experimenting with disease” and arbitrary action. Of course, among these four hallmarks the most important one is theory. I have frequently heard Liu Lihong quote a sentence by Zheng Qin’an, the founder of the Supporting-Yang School, which goes something like this: “Mastering herbs is not as good as mastering prescriptions. Mastering prescriptions is not as good as mastering treatment methods. Mastering treatments is not as good as understanding theory. If you are truly able to understand theory, having only one or two ingredients at your fingertips means ingenious treatments and excellent prescriptions.” When we understand the intention behind these words, it is clear that these are words from the past but also that this statement is just as relevant for acupuncture. In the use of needles, it is equally important to have mastered all four of these hallmarks, and all we have to do is replace herbs as the last one of them with needles. Switching herbs out with needles, the four hallmarks become theory, treatment methods, prescriptions, and needles! This is the origin of the term *fangzhen* 方針 [in the sense of acupuncture prescriptions]. It seems like a long time indeed that the Dao of Acupuncture has been lost!

In herbal prescriptions, different prescriptions are created by matching different herbs, in order to address different illness patterns. In acupuncture, different prescriptions are not composed from different needles but are created merely by inserting an identical needle into different locations on the human body, in order to achieve different treatment goals.

Sometimes even the location is identical, and it is only that the time of needle insertion was changed, and even this can become a different prescription and consequently treat a different pathology.

In the human body, the distribution of channels and network vessels differs from one space to the next, and the movement of channel Qi differs from one time to the next. For this reason, the key factor in the creation of acupuncture prescriptions is not the difference in needles but the difference in time and space! Why is it that a difference in time and space changes the acupuncture prescription? Because when time and space are different, Heaven and Earth are also different, and when Heaven and Earth are different, Yin and Yang are of course different as well, and because of this, the acupuncture prescriptions have their differences. Thus, when we discuss acupuncture, we must always bring the conversation back to Yin and Yang. It is only when we return to Yin and Yang that we have a Dao, that we can have something that is easy to use and difficult to forget, and that the effect of our needling on expelling illness might be like pulling out thorns, wiping away filth, untangling knots, and bursting through blockages.

For a number of reasons, in our extensive discussion of the “theory, treatment methods, prescriptions, and needles” behind the “Yellow Emperor’s Inner Needling” in the following pages, neither our teachings nor our readers’ learning will ever stray from the topic of Yin and Yang. This is an essential point that we must never forget!

The plain techniques of the Yellow Emperor’s Inner Needling are already as simple as they could be, and the foundations can be mastered in a timespan of only ten to fifteen days. And yet, their efficacy is so vast that they can be described instantly. As such, they completely fit the two distinctive characteristics of acupuncture technique mentioned above! Of course, a technique of utmost simplicity must contain a theory of the utmost profundity. This utmost profundity implies its limitless hidden potential and capacity. For this reason, as soon as you have figured out this theory by learning the needling techniques, you have not only mastered the Dao of Acupuncture but also gained inside into the affairs of humanity.